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ABSTRACT

This study examined the meaning of learner centeredness from the perspectives of practicing elementary, secondary, and postsecondary teachers who were constantly working to live out this concept in their teaching lives. The primary data sources were teacher interviews collected from each participant during a larger study on how teachers came to take a learner-centered stance and a review of literature on learner centeredness. All teachers were part of Foxfire, a culturally responsive, community focused, learner-centered approach to teaching, learning, and curriculum. During the interview, respondents discussed what learner centeredness meant to them and how they came to be the teachers they currently were. Respondents received a copy of the transcripts of their interviews so they could review them and record any corrections, elaborations, or new information. Data analysis led to a descriptive definition of the term learner centeredness comprised of five elements: the teacher's focus is on the learners; the teacher guides and facilitates learning; the teacher promotes active learner engagement; the teacher promotes learning through interactive decision making; and the teacher is a reflective, ongoing learner. (Contains 47 references.) (SM)

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Teachers' perspectives on what it means to be Learner-Centered

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Abstract

This purpose of this study was to offer a descriptive definition of the term "learner-centered" from the perspectives of practicing teachers who are constantly working to live out this concept in their teaching lives. Data included interview transcripts as well as participants' revisions of original interviews. Analysis of data led to a descriptive definition of the term 'learner-centered' comprised of the following five elements: the teacher's focus is on the learner; the teacher guides and facilitates the learning; the teacher promotes active engagement of learners; the teacher promotes learning through interactive decision-making; and the teacher is a reflective, on-going learner. The findings in this study underscore the need to understand the term learner-centered as a complex multi-faceted concept that may best be described through practicing teachers' definitions and lived experience

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Much energy is being expended in efforts to move away from instructional methods that rely on mass transmission of knowledge toward those described as learner-centered. The National Board for Professional Teaching (1996), the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (Darling-Hammond, 1992a) and the National Commission of Teaching and America's Future (1996) assume learner-centered approaches in their definitions of excellence in teaching. Early childhood educators (Braedekamp, 1992) and middle school educators (NSMA, 1995) also advocate learner-centered approaches and this emphasis is being echoed in numerous state-level standards documents. Meanwhile, countless individual educators are working to develop learner-centered classrooms and establish learner-centered schools.

Even a cursory review of the literature reveals two troubling features. Although the term 'learner-centered' is widely used it is rarely defined, suggesting that its meaning is universally understood and uncontested. A closer look proves this assumption to be untrue. Further, the conversation about learner-centeredness often fails to include teachers' perspectives that might provide lived meanings of learner-centered teaching. This lack of shared meaning and the absence of teachers' perspectives can only impede the efforts of all who are working toward more learner-centered approaches.

In this paper, we share the meanings of learner-centeredness thoughtfully honed by experienced teachers in their day-to-day teaching. The work reported here is part of a larger study of how these teachers came to take a learner-centered stance and what nurtured and sustained their convictions. Preliminary analysis suggests that these teachers' definitions are grounded in strongly held convictions about teaching and learning. While the depth and complexity of their understanding of learner-centeredness has increased over time, the fundamental beliefs on which these definitions are built have withstood philosophical challenges, overcome organizational constraints and obstacles, and endured the test of relentless self-examination of their own practice. Our goal is to introduce the emerging categories of meanings that these teachers have constructed around the concept of learner-centeredness into the professional conversation. In this way, we hope to offer a descriptive definition of the term 'learner-centered' that is derived from teachers who are constantly working to live out this concept in their teaching lives.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

Our work is grounded in a social constructivist psychology and a Deweyan perspective (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978) on experience and meaning-making. It proceeds from the assumption that knowledge and beliefs are developed in the crucibles of social interaction and reflective experience.

The constructivist paradigm describes a theory about learning that defines knowledge as "temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated and non-objective" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, pg vii). Within this paradigm, learners are active knowledge constructors driven by "goals and curiosities" (Nicase & Barnes, 1996, pg 204). The teacher invites students to build their own views of the world by asking questions and seeking answers in a collaborative atmosphere (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Carr, Litzinger, & Marra, 1997, Fosnot, 1996). In such classrooms, the students are in

control of and at the center of their learning, giving rise to the use of the term 'learner-centered' as a descriptor for constructivist instructional approaches. Within this paradigm, the teacher must give up the role of transmitter of knowledge that is so deeply rooted in the American schooling tradition (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

It was Dewey's contention that all significant learning is grounded in experience (1938). But experience alone is insufficient. It is careful, disciplined and purposeful thinking about that experience in search of meanings that can be carried forward to future experiences that makes it educative (Dewey, 1933, 1938). Taken together these perspectives form the foundations of the work reported here.

Authors' Perspectives

As researchers working in qualitative traditions, we are aware of the importance of the personal experiences and meanings we bring to the research. Consequently, we have taken care to reveal and explore our own meanings of learner-centeredness, school reform, and professional growth as learner-centered teachers in our own classrooms.

Recognizing that our perspectives would shape the ways we designed the research, we planned several exercises to identify and examine our assumptions before we began. First, we audio-taped and summarized our focused conversation on learner-centered teaching and learner-centered teachers. The summary revealed that we strongly held the following four beliefs: 1.) that learner-centeredness and learner-centered work is what we should be about in terms of education; 2.) that we would not find what we were looking for in the stories of teachers who have only been in the field for a little while; it takes a considerable amount of time to compose your teaching life; 3.) that teachers who are passionately convinced that learner-centered, democratic education is what they must provide can not teach in any other way; and 4.) that these teachers will hold fast in the face of obstacles and will work to change the obstacles.

In a second conversation, audio-taped and recorded in personal notes, we discussed descriptors that might characterize teachers we hoped to interview, in effect, articulating our shared definition of 'learner-centered'. Based on our own teaching and research, we composed the following list describing learner-centered teachers: 1.) teachers who seemed to be child-focused, meaning focused not only on what the child learns but also what the child brings to the classroom, 2.) teachers who appear to hold strong convictions and are not reticent to raise issues with children, 3.) teachers doing what may be seen to be non-traditional instruction in the classroom, 4.) teachers who are wise or sophisticated about those who share their convictions and those who do not, 5.) teachers who know that they're likely to run into trouble but do not alter their convictions or actions despite this knowledge, 6.) teachers who view teaching and learning as intricately connected and are therefore learners as well as teachers, and 7.) teachers who are focused on the child first versus the curriculum thus being the child's advocate. This list and the one above allowed us to revisit our assumptions throughout data collection and analysis to consider the ways in which they might support or get in the way of hearing the voices of the participants.

As members of Foxfire, a national network of learner-centered, academically focused, and community-responsive teachers of all grades and content areas, we have spent a great deal of time examining our own learner-centered teaching (Combs, 1998, 1999, Paris,1998), developing materials for learner-centered teachers (Combs & Stevens,

1998, Combs, 2000, Paris, 1999/1997), exploring learner-centered assumptions (Starnes & Paris, 2000), and facilitating Foxfire courses for experienced teachers. Given our personal perspectives and experiences, honed and focused through our association with Foxfire, we identify several defining characteristics of learner-centered classrooms. In such classrooms, students of all ages and their teachers jointly construct learning activities designed to enable all learners to meet and exceed curriculum goals and assess their progress toward those goals. Students' interests and experiences drive their decisions about how they will meet required curriculum goals and how they will use the knowledge and skills they gain to achieve ends that matter to them and their communities. Students' needs and desires also drive how they will acquire the additional the skills and knowledge they will need in order to achieve those ends. These classrooms, then, are learner-centered in that they enact a constructivist perspective on learning and teaching and ground learning in students' experiences in and out of the classrooms, while engaging students in planning how they will learn and how they will construct their learning community.

Our perspectives on school reform and professional growth grow out of progressive and social constructivist perspectives grounded in and refined by our personal experiences. While much of the reform literature identifies the school or school system as the unit of analysis and target of change efforts, we frame the problem differently. As Sarason argues, "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think—it's as simple and as complex as that" (1971, p.193). Teachers' development is grounded in teachers' individual experiences and desires and is driven by individual teacher's questions, curiosities, and needs. It is a process of seeking, of individual meaning-making. It cannot proceed without a teacher's assent. The teacher's choice and voice must drive the process (Marsh, 1999). Therefore, we direct our attention to teachers' experiences and as well as their thinking (Starnes, 1999).

Building on Barbara's work on sustainable education reform (Combs, 1995a, 1995b; Combs, Mascia & Sellmeyer, 1997; Combs & Mascia, 1998; Combs, 1998) and Cynthia's work on teacher agency (Paris, 1992, 1993), we designed a study of the personal professional histories of experienced teachers who, by their association with Foxfire have identified themselves as working from a learner-centered perspective. We assumed that no single path, no standardized treatment, and no uniform procedures could support individuals who become learner-centered teachers. So we began with teachers whom we or others believed to be already there and asked them to look back at their own growth, their own changes. How did they come to be the teachers they are today? What conditions and experiences nurtured and sustained their learner-centered stance? But before they told the stories of how they became learner-centered teachers, we asked them to share their perspectives on what it means to be learner-centered.

Data Sources

The primary sources of data were individual interviews and demographic information collected from each participant in the larger study and a review of literature for current uses of the term 'learner-centered.' The interview process consisted of two phases. During the first phase, participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions:

- We're interviewing you because either you've identified yourself to be or you are someone perceived to be, by me or someone else, a learner-centered

teacher. Could we begin by talking a bit about what learner-centered means to you?

- Tell the story of how you came to be the teacher your are today.

All the participants in this study are associated with Foxfire, a culturally responsive, community-focused, learner-centered approach to thinking about teaching, learning, and curriculum that predates the current push toward learner-centered teaching by several decades. The principles that underlie this approach (see Appendix A) have grown out of teachers' close examination of their teaching, careful articulation of the beliefs and principles that guide their teaching (Starnes, 1999), and are supported by an extensive body of theory and research (Starnes, Paris, Stevens, 1999). Participants in the study teach at the elementary, middle, secondary, and higher education levels in schools serving diverse populations in various parts of the country.

We limited our initial interviews to teachers who met the following criteria: 1.) they had taken the Foxfire Level One course; 2.) they had been teaching for at least five years; and 3.) they or others perceived their practice to be learner-centered. We also included ourselves as interviewees because we fit the criteria and more importantly, we believed that by telling our own stories prior to our talks with other participants, we would be better interviewers. We initially interviewed each other in order to test out the interview questions and develop possible prompts. Only when we analyzed the transcription of those interviews did we realize that they were rich with data about our own growth as learner-centered teachers.

Of those for whom data have been analyzed to date, 7 are elementary, 4 secondary, and 3 are teacher educators, one with elementary and early childhood teaching experience and the others with secondary teaching experience. Thirteen of the participants are female; one is male. All are white representing schools with disparate student populations in 6 states (Georgia, Kentucky, Washington, New York, and New Jersey, and South Dakota).

After these data were collected and analysis was underway, we conducted a search of the literature to identify the range of meanings ascribed to or associated with the term 'learner-centered'. The timing of this analysis was intentional. Just as we took pains to identify our own perspectives early in the process so that we might read the data conscious of the risk of imposing our meanings on the data, we delayed our analysis of the literature in order to avoid imposing extant definitions on the data.

We reviewed books and journal articles written for teachers and academics that identified learner-centeredness as one of the central constructs or the central construct in the work.[1] Because we would be using the outcomes of the search to provide context for meanings the teachers in the study currently ascribe to the term, we limited our search to recent publications, establishing 1991, the year NCREST held its conference "Building Learner Centered Schools" as the earliest date searched.

[1] While recognizing that the terms 'learner-centered', 'student-centered' and 'child-centered' are often used interchangeably, we also searched 'student centered' and 'child centered'. A cursory review of the titles and abstracts of the contents of each of the searches revealed that the terms were applied to a similar range of content areas and learning situations, but the term 'child centered' was more likely to be used to refer to programs for younger learners. We limited our close analysis to the term to 'learner-centered' as this is the term that is more prominent in the vocabulary of the individuals with whom we were working.

Data Analysis

The narrative histories were analyzed using a multi-step, cooperative procedure (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the first phase, the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. During the second phase, drafts of transcripts were mailed to the interviewees along with fresh audio-tapes and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Participants were asked to review the transcript and record any corrections, elaboration, or new information. Then they returned their tape or their written responses for transcription and analysis. To date five of the 12 interviewees have returned responses.

We have reviewed and revised transcripts of conversations, e-mails, and memos. We coded data using the qualitative software program, QSR NUD*IST 4 (1997). First, we conducted a document search and culled all text units that contained the words "learner-centered." Second, we read through transcripts and gathered text units in which teachers talked about learners or their practice in the same ways they did when using the words "learner-centered." For example, one teacher defined 'learner-centered' in terms of student choice as illustrated in this quote: "...so I think of the student-centered stuff being the stuff that allows the students choices." Later she used the word "choices" again as she told the story of a particular classroom event. She stated, "I started thinking about that, but that was really a way for them to make choices. They're not locked into it..." Although she did not use the words, 'learner-centered,' she did repeat a key idea from the previous excerpt, so we coded the text unit within the category *Learners Making Choices*.

Once all preliminary codes had been developed, we reviewed codes to eliminate redundancies and merge related codes into sub-categories. Following this, we analyzed all codes for emerging themes that would provide descriptive headings for the participants' definitions of 'learner-centered'. Seven broad themes emerged based upon the analysis, but only those five that contained multiple data from at least seven participants were included in this paper.

Next, we reviewed the literature looking for explicit and implied meanings of the term 'learner-centered'. Where a definition was stipulated, the sources and rationale for that definition were identified. Where the term was used without definition, terms used in association with it were logged as in the phrase "learner-centered, teacher-facilitated curriculum". Associated terms were also identified by the same procedure used when analyzing the interview data, by noting terms used when authors were referring to teaching, learning, curriculum, classrooms, or schools in the same way they did when using the term 'learner-centered'. Terms used in opposition to 'learner-centered' were also noted, e.g., 'teacher-driven', 'content-centered', or 'telling as teaching'.

Findings from the Literature

Although widely used, the term 'learner-centered' is rarely defined suggesting agreement on its meaning. It is not unusual to find cases in which other central concepts in a work are defined but 'learner-centered' is used without definition. For example, in "Professional development and the learner-centered school" (Loucks-Horsley, 1995), the author defines 'professional development', but not 'learner-centered'.

Implied Definitions

Meanings of the term 'learner-centered', can be inferred from the terms that authors associate with it. These terms vary widely. In the documents reviewed, terms as disparate in focus as 'inquiry-based', 'consumer-led', 'competency-based', 'democratic',

'situated', 'inclusive', 'fostering creativity', 'student empowerment' and 'thematic units' and 'learning centers' were used in association with 'learner-centered'. The full set of terms could be arranged in very few logical clusters and the three loose clusters that emerged accounted for fewer than half the terms encountered. One such cluster formed around constructivist ideas such as building on students' experiences, capitalizing on their interests and questions, and working toward student ownership of ideas. Associated terms included 'inquiry', 'curiosity', 'student understanding', 'learner's experience', 'whole language', 'emphasizing meaning', and 'constructivist'.

A second cluster formed around the role of the teacher as a facilitator of students' learning. The terms 'coaching', 'guiding', 'supporting', 'scaffolding', and 'facilitating' made up this cluster. A third, less coherent cluster of terms formed around responsiveness to students. This cluster included terms describing attention to cultural and intellectual variation in students, as well as differences in learning style and preferences in scheduling, fee structures, and even parking.

Meaning could also be inferred from the terms used in opposition to 'learner-centered'. 'Teacher-centered' and 'teacher-driven' were used frequently to establish meaning by way of contrast as were uses of the word 'traditional'. 'Content-centered' was used in opposition to 'learner-centered' as well. Yet terms that were used by some in opposition were also used as associated terms by others. For example, statements such as "classroom assessment should be learner-centered ... [and] teacher directed" and "classroom research is learner-centered [and] teacher-directed' were found. In a similar manner, references were made to "flexible, learner-centered' materials that were based on a "direct instruction model".

While it might be said that all uses of the term focused on the learner, the reasons given for doing so (when reasons were given) varied. Some focused on the learner in order to increase enrollment in continuing education; they were attentive to responding to students' needs for flexible scheduling, parking, credit and the like. Others focused on the learner's affective needs such as increasing the learner's self-esteem or empowerment; they focused on knowing individual students well and being culturally responsive and democratic. Still others focused on the learner in order to increase academic success. For some this meant getting to know the learners well – their home experiences, culture, interests, needs, learning styles – so that teachers might make appropriate curriculum decisions for their students. Others with the same purpose involved students directly in curriculum decision-making.

Explicit Definitions

The few authors who define 'learner-centered' tend to focus on narrow aspects of the concept calling to mind the story of the blind men and the elephant. While one focused on enabling students to "take charge of their own learning" (Kim & Zitzer, 1999), another emphasized "meeting individual learning needs at different rates" (Charoula, 1998). Another (Thornton & McEntee, 1995) where "the learner is truly at the heart of an education of possibility, asking, who is the learner?"

Fewer still describe the genesis of their definitions. The case of one author who does (Schrenko 1994) raises questions about the others. Schrenko's definition is extrapolated from what she assumes others would recall about learning something "quickly, easily, and well" (p 2). She presents a list of descriptors – student interest,

teacher modeling, hands-on, meaningful experience, positive affect, required thinking – and states that "the learner-centered school is one in which many of the criteria listed above are present most of the time in all classrooms" (p.4). She includes an overview of belief systems that support her definition of learner-centeredness, a list of school structures and teaching strategies the author associates with the definition, and some fictional portraits of learner-centered schools, making this one of the more extensive definitions found. Yet while this author clearly specifies a meaning, she does so from personal perspectives with the presumption of general agreement.

There are, however, several more fully developed and well-substantiated definitions of learner-centeredness. Of these, the work of the American Psychological Association (APA) in association with Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) and the National Center for Restructuring Schools and Teaching (NCREST) are the most extensive.

In 1993, the Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education published 12 research-based learner-centered psychological principles, later revised and expanded to 14 (Work Group of the APA's Board of Educational Affairs, 1997). Research was reviewed in search of principles that supported individual learning and achievement and the principles distilled into 5 "holistic practices". Their findings were presented to teachers, students, and administrators to "further distinguish effective practice" (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p.xv). The resulting definition follows:

> "The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (the heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives the educational decision making. The learner-centered perspective is a reflection of the twelve learner-centered psychological principles in the programs, policies and people that support learning for all. (McCombs and Whisler, 1997 p.9).

Numerous publications have been generated by APA/McREL, all closely following this definition. Discussion and debate continue on the content of the learner-centered principles and further revisions are anticipated (Woolfolk, 1998).

In 1991, NCREST sponsored a conference, "Building Learner-Centered Schools", and generated a series of documents on instructional practices, supports, and accountability in learner-centered schools (Banks, et al., 1992, Darling-Hammond, 1992b, Snyder, et al., 1992, Darling-Hammond et al., 1993, Lieberman, et al., 1994, Ancess, 1995). While two (Darling-Hammond, 1992b, having to do with standards of practice and Ancess, 1995 a report on an accountability system) do not define 'learner-centered, the others do and do so with greater agreement in the content of their definitions than in those found in the rest of the literature but less than is found in the APA/McREL publications. Further, their definitions, both explicit and implied, consist primarily of beliefs, values, assumptions, knowledge, understandings, and patterns of thinking as opposed to descriptions of practice. For example:

> "These learner-centered schools are philosophically rooted in the work of [those] who believed that schools should be observant of children's interests and responsive to their needs, that the purpose of education was to create the conditions for student development

> and autonomy while establishing a pattern of support for continuous progress within a school community nurtured by a democratic ethic" (Lieberman, et al., 1994, p.3)
>
> "Sue's essential cognitive frame reflects a "learner-orientation". Such an orientation implies that Sue's special knowledge of each student and her knowledge of the classroom community are at the center of her pedagogical decisions." (Darling-Hammond et al., 1993, p.29)
>
> "[The school] holds a consistent core of common values about the nature of humanity and the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed. These values give rise to a conception of teaching and learning dependent upon an environment in which all learners are persistent actors in the dramatic tension between the construction of personal meaning and public standards." (Snyder et al., 1992, 9.68).

With the exception of the collection of papers produced following the 1991 conference (Banks, Darling-Hammond, and Greene, 1992), these beliefs, values, assumptions and ways of thinking are derived from case studies of learner-centered teachers and schools.

The variation in meaning, depth, and source of explicit and implied definitions of learner-centeredness found is great. When defined, the genesis of the definition is rarely revealed. Some of the most carefully constructed and extensive definitions were derived from a review and synthesis of research that was then informed by the experiences of educators and students (APA/MCREL) and case studies of learner-centered practice (NCREST). Curiously, although substantial and widely disseminated, most work proceeds without reference to them.

What is missing in discussions of learner-centeredness are the meanings that grow out of the thoughtfully-examined lived experiences of teachers who identify themselves as learner-centered and who are asked directly, "What does 'learner-centered' mean to you?"

Findings from the Personal Narratives

The teacher's definitions are unique and punctuated, illustrated, and extended with stories of their classrooms past and present. There are however five elements evident across their descriptions that combine to form a lived understanding of "learner-centeredness. In many instances, definitions emerged in the form of vignettes or stories. No simple declarative form could hold the complex, the nuanced, and the intersection of ideas that made up their definitions of learner-centeredness.

In this section, each element will be described and illustrated with salient quotations. Quotations, for the most part, are presented as spoken by the participant. In some instances however, minimal changes in usage have been made to increase the clarity and flow of the written message.

The Teacher Is Focused On the Learner.

One key element of participants' definitions of learner-centeredness was the importance of the learner's place at the middle of classroom life. The idea that the learner must come first was elaborated upon in three distinct ways in participant interviews. First, being learner-focused involved "knowing the learner." Julia's understanding was made explicit in her description of the sights and sounds of a learner-centered classroom:

It means making sure that every child is known—not just by me but by everyone in the room. So being learner-centered leads to lots of human interaction and lots of ways of getting to know each other and being known. Lots of voices, lots of ideas, lots of everyone's stuff filling the room[Text units 19-24].

ey's conviction came through as she shared the activities she has implemented in r learn about her students.

To me learner-centered means being focused on my students. They, not the content are at the center of the classroom. This means that I must know them and know them well.... In order to accomplish this I try to spend some time at the beginning of the semester getting information in the form of literacy histories. I have also asked students the following questions: what can I do that will make this the best class ever; what can your classmates do that will make this the best class ever; what do you think this course will be about[Text units 13-21]?

Second, being learner-focused meant understanding and building on students' ests and world experiences. Pam showed this as she related her concern that too y teachers have made too few connections to student's lives.

You know, the idea that what kids are experiencing in their lives, their real lives outside of the classroom is very significant, and I'm not sure we tap into that. We tap into it in a way where we strive to see what they're experiencing in their lives and try to gear our classrooms around that and those needs, but we don't really bring that life into the classroom[Text units 267-272].

e revealed a similar view when she talked about her discovery that building upon ıren's interests would result in greater learning. She noted:

That's when I went to Foxfire training. Instead of being a textbook and teacher-centered teacher I became a student-centered teacher, even in first grade, and it made all the difference in the world. I found that they were just like adults, if they were interested in something, they would learn it, they would remember it, they would retain, they could give it back to you. That's been about ten or eleven years ago[Text units 216-222].

The final and most frequently occurring idea, was the notion that being learner- ered required teachers to individualize their instruction. Although the integrity of the iculum and the teaching of skills was acknowledged as a given, what mattered most teaching based upon individual students' needs. Mary, a first grade teacher, was clear about this idea.

It means that I try to individualize in the classroom so that whatever subject we're learning about is individualized for each child as far as the reading that they do, the context that they're learning, how they're learning it. Some kids need to learn how to work in groups, so I'll try to structure more things for them to work in a group. Some need more reading practice. Some need to learn how to let others take the lead. And so I try to find the things that each child needs to work on and help them realize, kind of gently, the things they need to work on [Text units 8-18].

I ran the lights, I ran the spotlight, I did the backstage work. It was always part of being deeply involved, deeply committed to the process of the presentation, or whatever. But I've never felt that I had to be the central figure. And that's been a real guiding force. I think maybe that's one of the things that I realized that I didn't have to be part of the centerpiece[Text units 46-50].

During the interview, Alice spoke of herself as a facilitator, but also detailed a more complex teacher role, one that changed with the changing needs of her students.

Well, I guess the magic word is facilitator. Sometimes I'm a general overseer. Sometimes I'm a dispute manager. Sometimes I'm a keynote speaker. Sometimes I'm the cheerleading section. I think my role changes as the students' needs change. [I'm] what they need me to be. But the biggest thing that I think I do or accomplish with the kids is to help them believe that their dreams are possible; that their ideas are good; and that they have the potential to do and be anything they want to be. And, if they work together they're all better together than they are at times individually. So, I guess facilitator is an OK word[Text units 95-105].

Mary talked about getting out of the way so students could do the work of learning for themselves.

It was when the students...the day I realized they really didn't need me and that I needed to stand by so I wouldn't get in the way. Because they were working on something, they were involved, and they all knew what they were doing, they were helping each other, and setting their own direction, and I had nothing to do[Text units 421-427].

These teachers did not see themselves as laissez-faire instructors. They had worked hard with their students, setting learning goals and procedures in motion prior to their decision to stand in the wings. And, even when they moved backstage, they did not see themselves as out of the scene. They remained watchful, willing to allow students the freedom to learn but ready to help, nudge, and guide when needed. Being learner-centered did not imply being distant and indirect.

The Teacher Promotes Active Engagement

A third element of the definition learner-centered required that students be excited, invested, active participants in their own learning. The classrooms that these teachers described were busy and noisy, bustling with student-organized energy. Still, each teacher described her own unique way of promoting students' active involvement. Anna, teaching in a multi-age and multi-level classroom, guided such activity with daily class meetings.

And, in that case, we met at the top of every hour and discussed what we were going to do that day and what they needed. Did they need anything from me or the student- teacher? And then they would work in their groups. And then we would meet at the end of the hour and they would give a report of what they had accomplished that day and how much more time were they going to need to get it done[Text units 61-68].

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Dora, a first grade teacher, shared her excitement about bringing her students out of the regular classroom and actively involving them in exploring their community as a result of a mid-year move:

> *having to change my environment in December to a trailer where children flourished. And when I reflect back on that, once we were in the trailer, we were out of the school and it's really nice to be able to just walk out of the trailer, off the playground, even in the middle of winter, and go investigate and develop language by walking around the neighborhood. We started by investigating the different seasons and to learn science and observation. And, in a small sense, the community that surrounded our school became our classroom. And that was one of the most exciting years of my life as a teacher because I was truly doing what I believed the children needed to learn language[Text units 514-526].*

Perhaps Julia best described the look of the leaner-centered, active classroom in her conversation about classroom climate as she noted: *My classrooms—preschool, elementary, and college—always have a slightly disheveled, overstuffed look to the outsider and are always a tad too noisy [Text units 31-33].*

As the teachers talked about their classrooms it was obvious that their students were actively involved in the process of planning, organizing, gathering materials and learning required skills and content. The teacher, after preliminary planning, spent a great deal of time figuring out ways to engage students as Pam stated: *So I've got this idea I've got this lesson, I've got this unit, I've got this curriculum, how are they going to start grabbing into it and say, "Well, ok, we'll take some of that."[Text units 48-51.*

The Teacher Is A Reflective Learner.

Teacher as learner was a strong element of the lived definition of learner-centeredness. There were three ways participants talked about themselves as learners. First, within the classroom setting participants often saw themselves as students and their students as teachers as Marcie described during her interview:

> *I never have a day that I don't learn from the students because of the way they perceive things. It's amazing what they can bring in from the world they're living in and what they're seeing [Text units 89-91]....But it's because I tried to make my classroom, I've always tried to make my classroom learner-centered I was not the enemy, but I was there with them. So when they went through pain, I went through pain. And that's what I mean 'grow with them' grow emotionally with them, grow spiritually with them, grow academically with them because they know so much that you don't know[Text units 162-166]*

Second, teachers shared experiences where they needed to study and learn new things in order to keep pace with their students' interests and demands. Olivia found this necessary when her students decided to make a movie as a culminating activity for a study of the biography genre:

> *They wanted to make a movie and I had not done any video camera work, so that was one of the things that started pushing me to change too. I learned to run the*

more with my upperclassmen. And so with my underclassmen, like the freshmen and sophomores, basically at this point what I do is I just give them choices, you know, "How would you like to study this? You have this or this or this possibility, unless you can think of a better one." You know, so I start there.

Dora on the other hand feels very comfortable supporting and even expecting a good deal of decision-making from her students:

Well, it means that they make executive decisions in the classroom as to what they need to do and where they need to go to do it in the classroom; that we design the center of the classroom together based on their needs and their understanding of what is necessary; that they need to know what's necessary in the learning opportunity and the process of going through that learning opportunity, what kind of center they need [Text units 71-79].

As Olivia talked about the study of biography that she and her students pursued, she indicated that helping kids take ownership and make decisions was a boon for the keeping her fresh and excited about teaching:

You know 13 years I've been teaching [and] I'm not at all a stale teacher. There's always something new curriculum-wise. If I'm going to do something with biography, I'm never sure which way its going to shape up because the class will make that decision, so it will keep it fresh for me [Text units 836-841].

Coding of interview transcripts also gleaned a number of references to students' making choices. There were different levels of choice-making from a more open-ended to a more structured, teacher involved approach. Rick, a high school teacher held fast to the belief that students know what they need to learn:

And that sense of discovery, for them to discover how much they know and what they want to learn, and it's been validated over and over again by kids doing absolutely incredible things with just a little grain of acceptance of what they know and what they want to know. If you take a stack of books and put it out to them and say, "Ok, what do you need to know out of this, and what do you want to learn?" that there's an almost ninety percent correlation of what's written in the curriculum. And they know how to get there. And if you tell them to go do it they go do it with a great deal of integrity, a great deal of true ownership [Text units 161-170].

On the other hand, Dora, a fourth grade teacher, wanted to be more involved in the students' choice-making:

To sum this up, I guess a learner-centered teacher is the facilitator for the array of opportunities that students can have. Students ultimately make the choice, but the choice is within the requirements of the instruction that has to be accomplished. And I think that you have to live with the students' choices, so you have to be careful, also, I guess, about setting up the criteria for those choices. [Text units 473-477].

Regardless of where participants fell on a continuum of student choice-making the idea that choice was critical to leaner-centered teaching was clear. Pam shared the struggle she has had helping students make good choices but never faltered in her view of its importance.

> *[C]hoices, children having choices has always been big, always, from day one, was really important. But I didn't understand. I really didn't understand how to get there in a big picture way. Does that make sense? Yeah, you give kids choices, but how do you put them in the position where they have real choices, where they're directing their own education or their own learning? Those were pieces that were missing and I think through Foxfire, through the Core Practices, that really has happened [Text units 247-252]*

Marcie voiced a strong conviction about student voice in the classroom while giving a bit of advice to teachers who might not be doing so.

> *[T]o me, unless you give students an opportunity to have a voice in their own learning and to feel like they're an integral part of that classroom -- they're not just a number sitting over there in a seat before a teacher who just wants to be in the profession 9 months out of the year, 3 on vacation, from 7 to 3 --you're doing a disservice to your students -- and to yourself and you don't need to be in the profession [Text units 7-11]*

The words of the participants reveal a complex, practice-embedded definition of learner-centered. There is an unwavering faith in the learner as one who can make good choices and good decisions that result in learning. There is also a solid understanding that the teacher, to be learner-centered, must work hard to connect the curriculum to learner interests and desires, must lead through facilitation and learn continuously so that she might be ready for the disparate paths her students may take.

The Contributions of Lived Meanings

What is gained by introducing teachers' lived meanings into the conversation about learner-centeredness? The meanings in the literature and those of the teachers appear to share much common ground. The five themes that emerged from analysis of the teachers' narratives can be found in the review of the literature as well. It is significant, however, that a large body of varied literature needed to be reviewed in order to match rich, multifaceted, and complex definition that was presented in the narratives of these 13 participants. And while there is a central core of agreement on the uses of the term, there is more to be found in the teachers' narratives than just confirmation or agreement.

While many of the elements are the same, there is a difference in emphasis in the teachers' meanings. They place far greater emphasis on students' participation in planning and assessing learning activities, for example. While this was the strongest theme in the data, it was present, but only weakly, in the literature. This emphasis is not surprising given the centrality of this idea in the Foxfire Core Practices (Appendix A).

There are some interesting differences in the ways in which the teachers chose to convey their meanings. While the teachers could contrast their practices to those of the oppositional traditional paradigm, most did so only when asked. Such talk was not part

Significance of this work

This work addressed two issues. First, the false assumption that all are using the term 'learner-centered' to mean the same thing not only limits our ability to communicate effectively within and outside the educational community but makes us vulnerable to co-optation of the term by those who would vilify it or use it to political advantage.

Second, if one believes, as we and others do, that all significant and sustainable change takes place at the level of the individual teacher (Fullan, 1991; Tyack and Cuban, 1995) and specifically at the level of teachers' thinking, (Starnes, Paris, Stevens, 1999) then efforts to move toward more learner-centered practices must be informed by teachers' meanings and the process of the search for deeper understanding.

This work enlarges the conversation on the meaning of the term by introducing definitions grounded in day-to-day practice of teachers' engaged in a long-standing learner-centered tradition. But the greater lesson that might be taken from the teachers' definitions is a reconsideration of the problem we set out to address. The problem may not be that there is no agreed upon definition of 'learner-centered' but that we talk and write and act as though there is - or that there should be. And to an extent, there is and must be so that we can be assured that all who use it share some common core of understandings. But what the teachers' narratives suggest is that rather than treat learner-centeredness as a concept that can be captured in finite, static, unquestioned definitions we should instead hold it up for continuous examination and revision. We need to remain humble in the face of its complexity, attentive to that complexity, and determined to continuously examine and expand our understanding and our practice.

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